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ABSTRACT

There is an urgent need for the development of learning environments that are especially suited to disadvantaged minority youth. Much of that which needs altering is the climate or atmosphere within existing schools. Determining the nature of this learning environment is a continuing problem in educational research. This document reports a study of educational climate using detailed case histories. Two black, male high school students were studied on the following factors; (1) home environment; (2) community setting; (3) work setting; (4) requests for assistance; (5) employers' evaluations; (6) self-assessments; (7) curriculum decisions; and (8) cumulative record Analysis of the case studies suggested the following considerations in developing more effective learning environments for disadvantaged students: (1) more qualitative studies are needed in this area; (2) caring, dedicated educators must be trained for this population; (3) non-traditional resources such as work-study must be tapped; (4) supplementary individual assistance must be offered; (5) a support network of social services must be maintained; and (6) innovative line items must be included in school budgets. Suggestions for implementation are given and figures show how the research was conducted. A list of references is included. (VM)

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CREATING EFFECTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS FOR DISADVANTAGED LEARNERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DESIGN OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

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INTRODUCTION

This discussion of CREATING EFFECTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS FOR DISADVANTAGED LEARNERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DESIGN OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS, is especially slanted toward minority youth. The research seems to indicate that most disadvantaged learners are members of minority groups.

- Levin (1986) reported that academic achievement of a large percentage of minority students remained in the low percentiles.

- Hatton (1988) added credence to and extended Levin's findings when she recently stated that "current education reforms may improve schooling for some students, but they're leaving many minority students behind . . ." (p. 66). She further noted that reform measures supposedly designed to encourage organizational change, establish high expectations for all learners, and support innovative strategies have turned out to be measures taken merely to "screen out those students who do not meet the new standards" (p. 67).

- The American Council on Education (1988) in turn strengthens Hatton's case in reporting that minority students represent a dwindling proportion of today's college enrollment.

- Rist (1980a) in an earlier study argued that the unemployment situation in the United states had reached a level of utmost national concern, with rates of approximately 20% for youth in general and 40% for minority youth.

- Burbridge (1986) complemented the Rist stance as recently as two years ago when he rated minority unemployment figures as the highest in the history of the country.

Historically, Americans have expected that most children who finish the 12th grade will be prepared either to immediately enter the world of work and perform successfully there or to continue their education, eventually enter the work force,

and remain in it throughout their working years. Whether the student's ultimate educational goal is a high school diploma or higher education degree, the bottom line unequivocally emerging is the need for preparation to function as a successful self-supporting adult in mainstream American society. That means, at minimum, the ability to provide the basic necessities of life—food, shelter, health care, and adequate clothing—for self and family.

For the reasons mentioned--their low achievement levels, the screening out of large numbers of them from formal education settings, their disproportionately high rate of unemployment, and historical expectations of schools--a strong case appears to exist for the creation of learning environments especially suited to disadvantaged minority youths.

IN SEARCH OF DEFINITION

The connotation of school environments/climates is less than simplistic, for it involves human behavior. Consequently, studying or discussing the topic requires, as Argyris (1958) put it, "ordering and conceptualizing a buzzing confusion of simultaneously existing, multilevel, mutually interacting variables" (p. 501). In view of Argyris' observation and in search of a common definition around which the context of this discussion can be woven, reviews of both empirical and qualitative studies in which researchers looked at a number of variables in diverse ways were scanned.

The definition was chosen eventually from only a few of the environment/climate studies in the qualitative spectrum. Chronologically and summarily they are as follows:

- Tagiuri (1968) viewed climate and atmosphere in terms of the total environmental quality within a given school building. Four dimensions were considered as constituting the environment—the ecology, the milieu, the social system, and the culture.

- Moos (1974) and Insel and Moos (1974) created a construct composed of categories to conceptualize human environment. This social ecological system involved human interactions with physical and social dimensions of

the environment/climate and psychosocial characteristics being one of the six approaches to the human environment. The other five are behavior settings, ecological variables, practical and functional dimensions of particular situations, and organizational order.

- Nwankwo (1979) used the term "we-feeling" (p. 268) to capture the ambiance of school life and spoke of group subcultures and interactions among various actors.

- Rutter (1980) criticized research on school effects because it ignored the "internal life of a school: its attitudes, values, and mores, . . . (and) its qualities as a school organization . . ." (p. 209). He further stated that social rather than financial variables account for many of the differences between schools.

- Carter (1984) made many comparisons of children in 300 schools with regard to variables that can affect achievement because of various influences on the amount of time students attempt learning and the time they find available to take the opportunity to learn. (It seems that psychosocial influences in the environment/climate are inherent in both the decision to attempt learning and one's perception of clock hours available to participate or not participate in the process.)

There is no attempt in this discussion either to balance qualitative and empirical studies or to make a case for the desirability of one methodology over another. Further, school climate evaluative instruments are purposely excluded because it is assumed that school program effectiveness (which such instruments are designed to measure) is in reality determined by positive student outcomes--achievements and success stories that have continuity throughout the student's adult life.

The five studies cited above, which span a 16-year period, seem to suggest an intuitive-type, multifaceted, longitudinal theme. Nevertheless, regardless of the theoretical perspective, sociological or ecological, a student's total environment--

including those variables that are important to her/his emotional as well as physiological well-being--are to be considered in creating the maximally effective learning environment for that student. There follows, then, the need to have the Argyris (1958) description of the complex phenomenon, environment--the "buzzing confusion of simultaneously existing, multilevel, mutually interacting variables" (p. 501)--interface the discussion.

CREATING EFFECTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

A basic premise for determining effective learning environments that can be employed to begin counteracting the myriad problems that have caused many students to perform below grade level is this: First understand the student so that the right decisions can be made concerning the desirable learning environment to be contrived so that effective educational programs can be designed. A medical professional probably would handle a similar notion in terms of symptoms, then medical tests, and then treatment that may include individual prescriptions.

It seems logical that the first course of action is to study the phenomenon, the real--not mythical--student of the 1980s. Since meaningful isolation and control of the variables in a student's daily academic and social setting are rarely, if ever, possible, it seems reasonable that a part of the study would include investigating the disadvantaged student at firsthand in her/his natural settings--school, home, and community--over periods of time that include but extend well beyond the school day. It is believed crucial that the customary acceptance with regard to findings generated by empirical research--i.e., one will "understand the whole if you put together all of the parts"--be weighed against the reality that "the whole (student) is probably different than the sum of the parts" (Rist, 1980b). A case is thus made for employing ethnographic inquiry approaches, for such a methodology will generate "qualitative data (that) are more likely to lead to serendipitous findings and to new theoretical integration" (Miles and Huberman, 1984, p. 15).

Just recently, I had the pleasure of putting some of these suggestions into practive (Colvin, 1987). The case study approach was used in the investigation, following Diesing's (1971) description--a methodology that focuses in on a primary object (in this case, two high school students) to capture in-depth, detailed information concerning the sense of the individual's total world, not just part of it.

The subjects were two male, black senior high school students, one 16 and one 18, who were grossly deficient in basic skills as measured by work samples, teachers' judgments, and standardized tests (the California Achievement Tests, 1977, Form C, and the Iowa Basic Skills Tests). They were studied in their home and community settings and concurrently in a health care work-study program which was intended to increase these students' interest in perfecting their basic skills and to help them do that. The investigator designed a curriculum to supplement the existing school curriculum for this purpose.

Most of the materials used in the study were common, well-known items--supplies and equipment--found in most senior high schools and health care central supplies and medical records departments. The exceptions were five forms created and designed especially to aid in gathering the data sought in the study and to view the ongoing process on a continuum and from a cumulative standpoint:

- A "Request for Assistance" form used by each student to request instructional help in areas where he perceived he needed it
- A "Work-Study Student Performance Evaluation" form adapted from the community health care corporation's own evaluation instrument
- A "Weekly Interview" form to record each student's own assessment of his performance
- A "Curriculum Decisions" form for planning needed instruction
- A "Cumulative Record" form on which to chart data from all available school written records for the subjects, dating back to their kindergarten years.

A review of the relevant literature was done, focusing on (1) education-employment programs for disadvantaged youths, (2) research on their achievement and the impact of schooling on the economically disadvantaged, and (3) personalizing instruction.

The collection of data would have been incomplete without home visits, several trips around the neighborhood, and interviews with the parents. The overall objective was to obtain information about the subjects' neighborhoods, the physical appearance and the atmosphere of the subjects' natural settings, the subjects themselves as perceived and communicated by their parents, and the general home life. The investigator talked with the parents in reference to home rules and regulations; the subjects' social relationships and activities; siblings; parental goals and expectations for the subjects; perceptions of the subjects' assets and liabilities, academic and social skills, likes and dislikes, and so on; and parental expectations from and commitment to the school.

Two primary notions undergirded the procedures used in the study: (1) A range of appropriate methods, such as those previously discussed, was needed to meet the varied demands of the study; and (2) data acquired during the probe and prior information were both considered to be part of the bank of knowledge on each subject, so that all available data were used as input variables to make decisions regarding supplementary/student individual assistance (SIA) in academic and social domains.

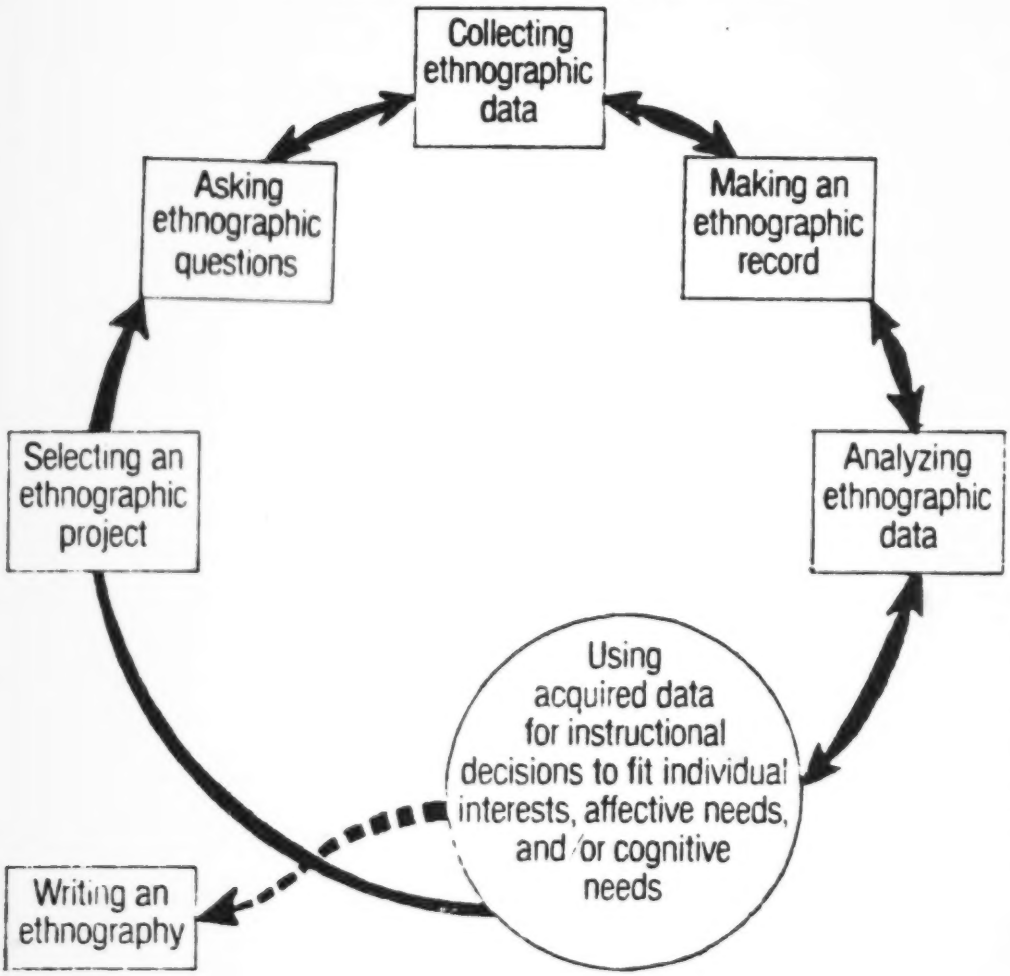
The ways in which the specially designed forms facilitated the data gathering closely followed the Spradley cycle (Spradley, 1980), except for one component added by the investigator. This added component is especially important to this discussion, for it involved the use of past and currently acquired data to plan for on-target academic assistance that would create a fit between each individual subject's interests and his affective and cognitive needs. (See Figure 1 on page 7.)

The investigator's role has been merely highlighted here. Figure 2, on page 8, is a graphic representation of the multiple roles involved to carry out the study.

The data gathered throughout the study portrayed the meshing of a school facility with programs and holistic beings under complex, voluminous, and in some instances even paradoxical situations. According to Larry M. Speakes, former Deputy White House Press Secretary, ("Black Teen Jobless Rate Tops 50%," 1981), conditions such as those included in the ethnography have been compounded over a

Figure 1

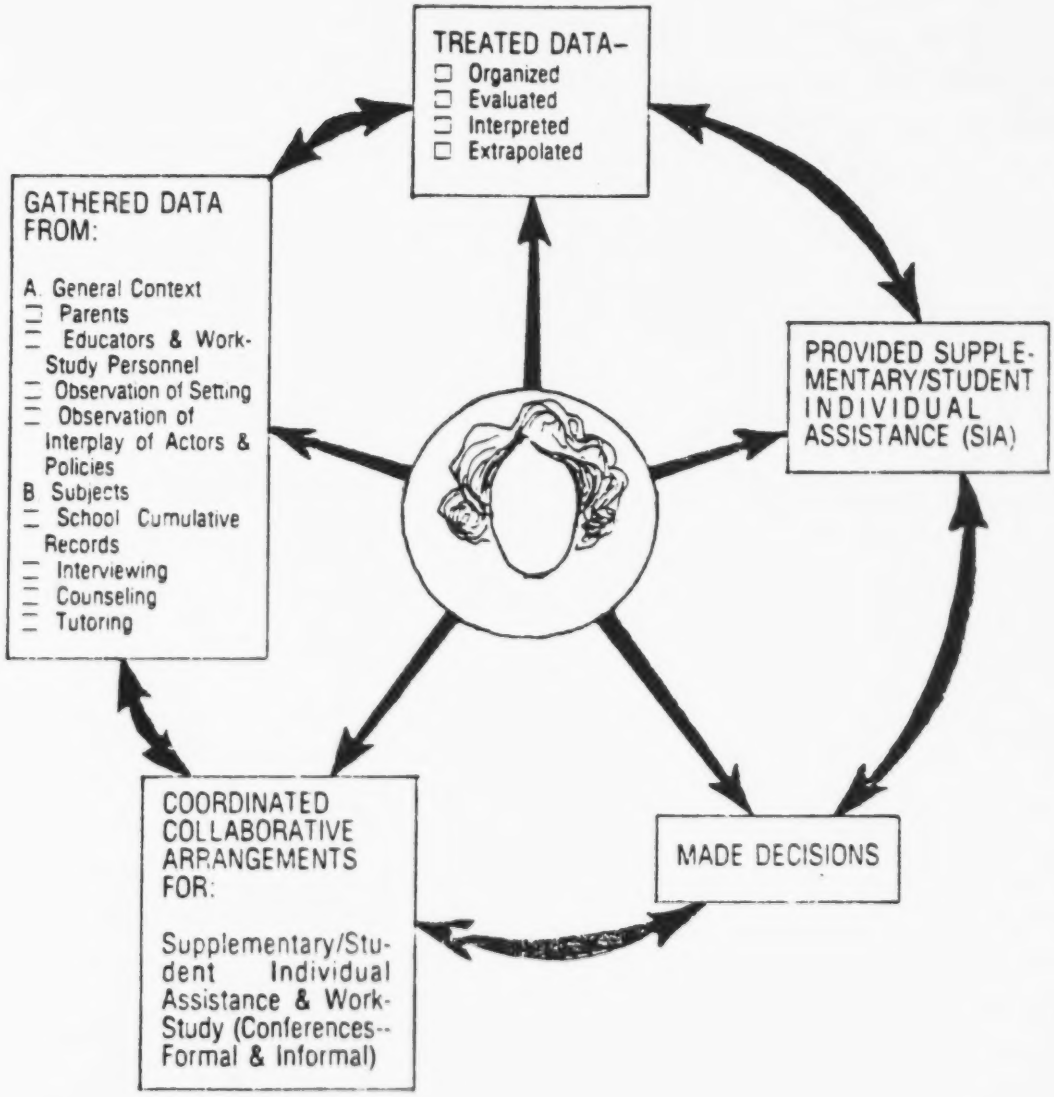
An Ethnographic Research Cycle
for Making Individualized Instructional Decisions
to Meet Affective and Cognitive Needs


Collecting ethnographic data
Making an ethnographic record
Analyzing ethnographic data
Using acquired data for instructional decisions to fit individual interests, affective needs, and/or cognitive needs
Writing an ethnography
Selecting an ethnographic project
Asking ethnographic questions

Note: Adapted from Participant Observation (p. 29) by J. P. Spradley, 1980, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Figure 2

Multiple Roles of the Investigator



Note: From A Description of Two Disadvantaged, Learning Deficient High School Students and Alternative School and Work-Study Experiences Designed for Them (p. 194) by Shirley B. Colvin, 1987, Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International.

period of many years and are considered to be a historical problem. He further stated that these conditions have developed into overwhelming, critical circumstances affecting society in many ways.

While the effective educational environments for disadvantaged learners are believed to have some commonalities, it is also recognized that many differences exist. It follows, then, that the ultimate effective learning environment for the individual disadvantaged learner requires the appropriate fit between that individual's interests and her/his affective and cognitive needs. In the context of this discussion, the implications of this notion seem clear.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DESIGN OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

The data seem to point to the need for: (1) additional qualitative studies that appropriately address the phenomenon; (2) competent, caring, dedicated educators who desire and are trained (in addition to traditional teacher preparation) to work with the disadvantaged learner; (3) adequate resources that may be different from those traditionally used in school programs, including work-study sites for high school students where on-the-job supervisors are willing (and perhaps paid) to be a part of the training program; (4) supplementary individual assistance; (5) a support network and social services if needed; and (6) innovative line items in the traditional school budget (which does not necessarily mean an increased budget).

Some practical ways to achieve these suggestions are listed below (Colvin, 1987, pp. 177-180):

- Surveys of dropouts and disadvantaged graduates should be made to provide critical information on the assets and liabilities of past and existing high school programs, experts should be employed to administer a variety of tests to provide multifaceted profiles of deficient learners, and studies should be made over at least a semester of the variables that produce a positive atmosphere.

- School in-house discussion of the results of the data gathered--implications for curriculum, use of the findings in the daily instructional program, and other topics relevant to the student population--should be made a part of continuing in-service education for the entire professional staff of the school.

- Paid time should be allotted for additional mandatory relevant in-service sessions that would be appropriately planned and conducted jointly with a university to extend and update the teachers' current professional knowledge base.

- Evidence of home-school cooperation (e.g., conferences at school, home visits, therapeutic sessions, minicourses in parenting, monitoring home assignments) should largely determine the student's prerogative to be matriculated in the newly designed school whose programs attend to the notion of an accurate fit between and among the student's current interests and cognitive and affective needs.

- Each student should be assigned a professional staff member as his or her advocate who will have contact with the student outside the classroom setting (at lunch, in conferences, in extracurricular activities, and in other situations). The advocate should keep a weekly log (a paragraph or two, signed and dated) on the student in a central location and should discuss the assignee with a designated administrator and panel of other educators and school professionals for the purpose of plotting appropriate courses of action for effective schooling.

Effectively educating, thus empowering, disadvantaged learners represents a challenge to the future of education in America. Let us hope that educators, researchers, and others "will accept their part of the responsibility to learn how to educate holistically the dependent, socially and/or economically deprived, and the oppressed. Otherwise, the society may continue to deteriorate because its educators lack the know-how to teach disaffected youth so that they can become a part of mainstream America.

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